

# Was the Australian army placed on alert during last year's political crisis?

Mike Head  
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According to figures within the governing Liberal-National Coalition, Australia came close to a constitutional crisis last August during the removal of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister.

Revelations this week about the intensity of last year's political crisis point to the Coalition coming to the brink of a public split, as well as to the ongoing instability of the entire political establishment.

After a week of turmoil, Scott Morrison became the seventh prime minister within just 11 years. The events of last August were part of a long-developing breakdown of the parliamentary order under escalating economic, political and geo-strategic pressures. Prime ministers, both Coalition and Labor Party, have been ousted in quick succession since 2007, either via landslide election defeats or inner-party coups.

This has been the result of mounting tensions generated by the rising US-China conflict, worsening working-class living conditions, growing social inequality and deepening popular disaffection with the two parties that have maintained capitalist rule since World War II.

The ousting of Turnbull marked a further lurch to the right in the political elite. Morrison and his supporters, sometimes dubbed the "Religious Right," are spearheading a drive to transform the Coalition into a Trump-style far-right populist movement as a means of diverting the mounting social unrest in reactionary nationalist directions. They are also seeking to satisfy the demands of Washington for an unconditional commitment to war preparations against China.

In 2015, Turnbull, the multi-millionaire merchant banker figurehead of the Liberal Party's "socially progressive, fiscally responsible" wing, had himself ousted Tony Abbott, the leader of the party's "hard right" faction. But Turnbull proved incapable of delivering the economic restructuring demanded by the corporate elite. He was also regarded in Washington as unreliable

because of his efforts to repair relations with Beijing in order to protect Australian capitalism's lucrative export markets in China.

Numbers of those involved in Turnbull's ouster, quoted in *Australian* columnist Niki Savva's newly-published book, *Plots and Prayers*, said Turnbull threatened to ask the governor-general, ex-military chief, Sir Peter Cosgrove, to intervene. Turnbull predicted that Cosgrove would use the governor-general's constitutional "reserve powers" to refuse to appoint "hard right" challenger, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, as prime minister, even if Dutton won the Liberal Party leadership and commanded a majority in the House of Representatives.

Turnbull claimed that Dutton was disqualified from sitting in parliament itself because Dutton's wife owned a childcare centre that received government subsidies, supposedly breaching a constitutional ban.

Attorney-General Christian Porter told Savva he was "facing down a potential constitutional crisis. Ultimately, one that got to DEFCON 4, and then all the army stood down." If Dutton had won the party room ballot, Turnbull would have asked Cosgrove to veto him "and then Australia wouldn't have had a prime minister."

Porter said Turnbull backed down from his threat to contact Cosgrove only after Porter objected and declared he would resign as attorney-general. Porter's resignation could have split the government and brought the constitutional crisis to a head in a very public fashion.

Even so, Turnbull later made preparations to personally ask Cosgrove to approve a snap general election to block the inner-party coup. Christopher Pyne, then a cabinet minister, told Savva that Turnbull had his official limousine and personal security officers ready on standby to visit Government House to seek parliament's dissolution. Savva provides no explanation as to why Turnbull abandoned this second plan.

It is not clear whether Porter was speaking literally

about the military being placed on alert. DEFCON 4 is a US military term for above-normal readiness, combined with active intelligence activity to identify suspicious activity. Savva's book avoids any examination of Porter's use of such language, and all the media coverage has failed to pose the obvious questions:

Was the army on alert, and then "stood down?" If so, who ordered the activation? Did it involve the expanded military call out laws pushed through parliament last year, which permit the prime minister, other "authorising ministers" or the armed forces chief to mobilise troops to suppress "domestic violence?"

Clearly, the corporate media does not want such questions raised. The danger of military intervention is not far-fetched. There would have been concerns within the political and military-intelligence establishment that any standoff over Turnbull's removal could have opened the way for the acute underlying social unrest to emerge, directed against the government and the political order as a whole.

Whether or not the army was placed on alert, the infighting provoked moves to call in the governor-general's potentially dictatorial "reserve powers," derived from the British monarchy, which remain entrenched in the colonial-era 1901 Australian Constitution.

These were the same murky powers exercised by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in the "Canberra Coup" of 1975. With the clear backing of the Ford administration and the CIA, Kerr dismissed the Labor government of Gough Whitlam, after it failed to contain a powerful movement of the working class for higher wages and basic social rights, during the global radicalisation of workers from 1968 to 1975. Invoking his role as "commander-in-chief" under the Australian Constitution, Kerr was in contact with military generals during that crisis, and the army was placed on "red alert."

A general strike movement against Whitlam's sacking was ultimately shut down by Whitlam himself, acting in partnership with Australian Council of Trade Unions President Bob Hawke, supported by all wings of the trade union bureaucracy, above all the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia. Hawke feared the eruption of mass working-class opposition, saying: "What has happened today could unleash forces in this country the like of which we have never seen."

There is no doubt that Turnbull was prepared to invoke again the anti-democratic powers of the vice-regal representative. Tweeting in response to Savva's book, he

denounced Porter's view that the governor-general could swear in as prime minister only someone who could guarantee a majority in parliament. Turnbull declared that the governor-general was not a "constitutional cipher."

A potential constitutional crisis was averted only after Dutton failed to win the Liberal Party parliamentary ballot to replace Turnbull. Savva documents how Morrison's Christian fundamentalist circle of parliamentary supporters "war-gamed" for months, first to boost the numbers for Dutton's challenge, then temporarily join forces with the "progressive" wing to assemble a 45-40 majority for Morrison.

Savva's book reflects concerns in ruling circles that Morrison's evangelism, while serving to mobilise a socially conservative base, will antagonise wider layers of the population and prove unable to deal with a resurgence of working-class struggles, under conditions of US-China and global trade wars, economic slump and preparations for catastrophic US-led wars.

The faction-torn Coalition only clung to office on May 18 because of the deepening hostility among working people to the decades-long, pro-business record of the Labor Party, whose vote dropped to an historic low of 33 percent.

Last year's events are a warning. Even if Porter were speaking metaphorically, his reference to DEFCON 4 underscores the readiness of elements within the ruling class to resort to the military or to other authoritarian means in response to intensifying political crises, working-class discontent and political disaffection.



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